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Probable Communist Reactions to
Certain US Actions

2 June 1965

~~TOP SECRET~~

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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS
TO CERTAIN US ACTIONS

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Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

As indicated overleaf
2 June 1965

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TS # 185858

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

2 June 1965

SNIE 10-6-65: PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US ACTIONS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the reactions of the USSR, Communist China, and North Vietnam to US air strikes, including the use of heavy bombers, aimed at destroying fighter and bomber aircraft and surface-to-air missiles in North Vietnam.

THE ESTIMATE

1. Present Communist Reading of the Situation. In failing to make any meaningful response to the "pause," the DRV has plainly indicated that it is prepared to accept not only a continuation of US air attacks on military and transportation targets south of the 20th parallel, but also a considerable risk that the US will extend such attacks northward. The USSR, by supplying limited numbers of fighters, SAMs, and light bombers to the DRV, probably hopes to deter the US from air attacks in the Hanoi-Haiphong

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area. The Soviets would not consider the actual combat capabilities of these weapons to be the primary deterrent factor; the deterrent effect would rest more in the recognition by the US that to attack this element of Soviet support for the DRV would risk involving Moscow even more deeply. "In addition, the Communists may be testing US determination through introduction of offensive bombers into the Hanoi 'sanctuary', and, if this provokes no reaction, it may well be the Soviet/DRV intention to proceed with creating a sizable offensive air threat capable of supporting a major DRV thrust into South Vietnam and/or Laos." Peiping's apprehensions regarding an extension of US air attacks northward are evident in its propaganda, its civil defense measures, and its public and private statements to outsiders, but it is evidently prepared to accept this risk.

Probable DRV Reactions

2. In light of these circumstances, attacks on North Vietnam's jet-capable airfields and SAM sites would be read by Hanoi to mean that military targets anywhere in the DRV were not safe from US attacks and that the chances of future attacks on urban centers and/or industrial targets were greatly increased. The DRV leaders would almost certainly believe that the US was ready to apply substantially greater force if needed to attain its stated objective of stopping DRV intervention in South Vietnam. It would also reinforce their concern that US objectives

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may not be as limited in scope as the US has avowed. They recognize the vulnerability of their cities and industry to US or US-aided aerial bombardment and realize that their laborious efforts at industrialization over the past decade could be wiped out in short order.

3. Hanoi's decisions, however, probably have been and will continue to be influenced by its estimate of the likely course of the war in the South bolstered by the memory of the Viet Minh victory over the French and by its doctrinal conviction that its determination to sustain a prolonged and grinding struggle will prove stronger than that of the US. It probably thinks that, given present VC military strength and the political fragility of the Saigon regime, Communist forces in South Vietnam are moving toward victories which could crack their adversaries' will to continue the struggle. If so, Hanoi might feel that punishment from the air would be an acceptable price to pay for the achievement of its political objectives, and the vindication of its doctrinal belief in the inevitable success of a "People's War."

4. The present Problem postulates specified vehicles of attack, i.e., B-52s, and precisely specified targets, i.e., the Soviet-supplied SAMs and jet fighter and light jet bomber aircraft (IL-28s), the former located close in to Hanoi, the latter located in the northerly areas of North Vietnam, and asks our estimate of probable reactions under the

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current political and military conditions. Our present estimate is that the odds are against the postulated US attacks' leading the DRV to make conciliatory gestures to secure a respite from the bombing; rather, we believe that the DRV would persevere in supporting the insurgency in the South. *

* The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF disagrees with the judgment made in this paragraph. He would substitute the following for the last sentence:

"Our present estimate is that the odds on the DRV making conciliatory gestures to secure a respite from further bombing will be markedly enhanced by successful accomplishment of the postulated US attacks, which by eliminating any concept of an area 'sanctuary' in North Vietnam will pose the added threat that urban/industrial targets might be next. The selective and limited nature of US bombing target selections to date may well have led Hanoi seriously to underestimate the extent of US determination to exert the necessary power to force discontinuance of DRV support for the insurgency in the south. A Moscow/Hanoi agreement on the requirement for a respite could provide both countries an acceptable 'out' which they could justify for 'tactical' purposes within the tenets of Communist doctrine."

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5. If Hanoi did persevere, it would be unlikely to revise its military strategy or basic timetable in response to the US strikes. Nevertheless, for psychological effect on both Communists and anti-Communists, Hanoi might order retaliatory Viet Cong raids, sabotage, or sneak attacks on major bases or installations in South Vietnam. For similar reasons, Hanoi -- perhaps encouraged by Peiping -- would almost certainly re-examine the possibility of striking at the US carrier force in the Tonkin Gulf by sea or from the air and would certainly study the feasibility of an air strike against US installations in South Vietnam. Though Hanoi would probably estimate that the chances of seriously damaging US forces were not great, the effect of a successful attack would be psychologically so advantageous that Hanoi might make the attempt if it had the capability.

6. If the US strikes had destroyed their air offensive capabilities, the North Vietnamese might consider an overt invasion of South Vietnam. Because of the great risks of such an action, however, we believe they would not do so. Hanoi would certainly continue and, to the extent possible, step up its support of the Viet Cong and would almost certainly seek to inject an increasing number of North Vietnamese line units into Viet Cong forces with little or no effort at concealment. The fears engendered by the US bombings would probably not destroy Hanoi's determination or loosen its control of the country. Indeed, it might have the opposite effect of rallying the population behind the regime.

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7. Probable Chinese Communist Reactions. Although the Chinese Communists have professed to believe all along that the US would expand its air strikes, the bombing of SAM sites and airfields north of the 20th parallel would still be regarded in Peiping as a major and serious development. However, the Chinese leaders probably are more optimistic than Hanoi, and certainly more so than Moscow, that the US is nearing a humiliating defeat in the South, and will urge Hanoi to stand firm whatever the cost. The use of SAC bombers would increase Peiping's concern that eventually these strategic forces might be used against targets in China, particularly in nuclear attacks against advanced weapons facilities. Nevertheless, the Chinese would feel a strong need to do something more to help the North Vietnamese, and to prevent Moscow from gaining more influence in Hanoi and in the Vietnamese situation in general. They would also seek to exploit the situation to further weaken Moscow's influence in the international Communist movement and in the under-developed world.

8. It is likely that Hanoi would request -- and that the Chinese would provide -- additional support, e.g., ground equipment and personnel for air defense purposes or engineering help for constructing and repairing airfields. The Chinese probably would also supply fighter aircraft units on request, providing

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they could be based in North Vietnam. They would not wish to use bases in China because of the risk of US retaliatory strikes against these bases.* The Chinese might offer to send ground combat troops to North Vietnam as an earnest of their commitment to defend their ally, but we do not believe bombing of airfields and SAM sites would bring Hanoi to the point of accepting such an offer by Peiping. Unless and until Peiping concluded that the existence of the Hanoi regime was in danger, it would probably not unilaterally send a "rescue mission" into North Vietnam. Peiping might, however, make threatening troop movements and additional air deployments in South China with the objective of deterring the US from further bombings.

Probable Soviet Reactions

9. US bombings of airfields and SAM sites, especially by bombers from the Strategic Air Command, would provoke a crisis for Soviet policy. So far the Soviets have been pursuing three somewhat inconsistent objectives -- to compete with Peiping for influence over the DRV, to contribute to deterring US pressures against Hanoi, and at the same

* The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, believes that the assumed vigorous US air attacks on major DRV targets would probably evoke the employment over North Vietnam of Chinese air defense from bases in China. Current deployment of Chinese aircraft to South China, the apparent completion of an airfield just north of the DRV border, and explicit Chinese statements alleging willingness to accept US bombing of China, suggest Chinese readiness to test US assertions that no sanctuary will necessarily exist should Peiping provide important support to Hanoi.

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time to avoid becoming overly involved in the present US-DRV confrontation. As noted in paragraph 1, the Soviets may also be testing US determination and be prepared, in the absence of a US response, to further increase the DRV's offensive capability. They have apparently hoped that, in view of the situation in South Vietnam, the US would sooner or later have to negotiate its way out of the war. The postulated US actions would strike a blow at such calculations and would probably convince the Soviets that the risks and costs of their involvement would be greater than they had assumed. In particular, there would be a greater loss of prestige in ignoring any casualties among Soviet personnel than might have been the case only a month ago.

10. The Soviets would almost certainly feel compelled to comply promptly with DRV requests to provide substitutes for those weapons systems destroyed by the US attack, though they might not again provide bomber aircraft. It is also probable that more Soviet personnel would be supplied to man such equipment. Moscow might even acknowledge a Soviet presence in the hope of deterring the US from further attacks, though this would risk a further loss of prestige if deterrence again failed.

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11. The Soviets would clearly recognize the danger of continued escalation, particularly since SAC had been employed. Hence, they would probably urge Hanoi to open up political avenues for controlling the conflict and would put pressure on the US to stop bombing and to negotiate. Soviet pressures would be exerted in a variety of forums, but the DRV's demonstrated unwillingness to involve the UN in Vietnam makes it unlikely that that organ would become a major political battle ground. US-Soviet relations would further deteriorate. If the crisis deepened and Hanoi chose to continue the struggle, the Soviets would face their most serious dilemma since the Cuban missile crisis.

12. If Hanoi stood adamant against negotiation, it is possible that the Soviets, recognizing the growing chances of being forced to confront the US in Indochina, would break with Peiping and Hanoi and back away from any deeper commitments. Moscow almost certainly realizes that the US enjoys a local military advantage vis-a-vis the USSR in the area. Nevertheless, we doubt that the Soviets would pay the political price of backing down and thereby handing China a major political victory and weakening its own prestige and influence throughout the world.*

* See Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF footnote to paragraph 4, page 4.

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13. Thus in the aftermath of the US attacks, we think the Soviets would probably conclude that they had little choice but to increase aid to the DRV. If the war continued without the prospect of US-DRV negotiations, the Soviets would probably extend new commitments to Hanoi and level new pressures and threats against the US. What precise moves Moscow would make in this direction would depend greatly on Hanoi's demands, on the nature and degree of Chinese involvement, and on how the Soviets interpreted US actions and estimated US intentions.

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